[Yankee Philosopher]

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“I'm seventy,” said Hank Davis. “And I ain't so awful bad off. I don't do nothin' much by way of real work now. Just help the boys out around the mill. I got three boys grown up, pretty good boys they are too. But I still help them out and take care of them. Why by God, I made more money in one year than all of them'll make in a lifetime. Kind of funny when you stop to think of it. But it's true.”

Hank lighted a fresh cigar and leaned back in his chair. A worn hat was pushed back on his head and scattered locks of gray hair fell on his forehead. He had a beak of a nose that curved over his toothless grin. His chin jutted out. He wore a rusty suit and no necktie.

“I can still work when I want to,” Hank said. “But I get up when I please now. No more early risin' for me — unless I feel like it. If I'm tired and want to stay in bed I stay. I leave orders at home that I won't accept no phone calls before eight o'clock anyway. When I get up I get up and eat a good breakfast — if I feel hungry. Then I go over to the mill and build a good fire in the office stove. And I sit around there and smoke and read and think, handle the orders that come in for lumber, write letters, answer the phone, things like that. Sometimes the boys come to get some advise and I go along into 2 the mill and help them out. I don't do much no more, but I guess I do enough, I got a comfortable chair in the office. It's warm and nice with the fire goin'. I set right back and enjoy life. I figger I done enough in my time so I deserve a little bit of rest now. Yes, by God, that's how I figger it.

“The boys are good boys but they'll never do what I done or make the money, I did. Maybe I spoiled 'em, made it too easy for 'em, I don't know. Ralph's the best one. He's a worker, that boy. Never leaves that mill. Right by that old saw all the time. He's a great worker but

he ain't got much of a head for business. The other boys are all right too. One of 'em runs a store; the other one's on a farm. I gave them both their start, set 'em both up. They're doin' all right too. Why hadn't they ought to be doin' all right? I give 'em a hand whenever I can. Glad to do it. Glad to be able to do it, you know. Nobody ever helped me much, but that's all right too. I didn't need nobody.

“I made six hundred dollars yesterday. Yessir, I sold that house I got last week and cleared six hundred on it.” Hank cackled in his throat. “The back was going to auction it off and they asked me to bid on it. I allowed I had enough property on my hands already. Well, I finally put in my bid and went home. Guess it kind of soured on their minds after I bid. Come to find out mine was the only damn bid made at all!” The laugh cackled out again. “Nobody bid against Hank Davis. I had a house I didn't even want — and I had it cheap. How a house you buy to live in ain't makin' you no money, is it? No more'n a suit of clothes you buy to wear makes you 3 money. Just kind of necessary, that's all, necessary to have — but no money-maker. Now a house you buy and sell at a good profit — or rent it out — that's where you're making money. The man that buys or pays you rent is the man spendin' the money. Course I didn't make a whole lot on this deal. Sold out too cheap; might's well given the place away. But I wanted to get rid of it. I got enough to tend to without no more.

“I was always buyin' and sellin' and tradin'. I been stuck and I've stuck others. Guess the balance in on my side, if any. Why, I made a trade with Sam Ellington the other day. Sam said he'd quit drinkin' if I quit smokin'. Well sir, I put my pipes right in the stove. And I quit drinkin' too — to kind of keep Sam company. When I heard Sam had broke over I started smokin' cigars. And I take a drink now when I feel like it. But I ain't smoked a pipe since. I would've kept the bargain fair and above-board if Sam had done his part. Sam's a good feller, damn good worker, but he likes his drinkin' liquor awful well, Sam does. It'll take a first-[classa?] undertaker to stop Sam from drinkin'.

“Years back I used to loan out money to people, folks as had to have it, you know, and maybe couldn't raise it from the banks. Lots of 'em need to curse me for a crook and a skin-flint and a bloodsucker, but I don't know. I figger, by God, I was doin' 'em a favor. They needed the money bad. I had it. They had debts — I had cash. I let 'em use it and they paid me for it. Ain't that a solid business proposition! Maybe [I?] did charge 'em more than the banks. Why not?” Hank croaked 4 with laughter. “If a feller wanted a hundred dollars I took his note for a hundred and twenty-five, you see? Then by God I charged him six percent on the hundred-and-a-quarter. You got to pay to get credit in this world. I always had to. If a man's got money he's a fool not to capitalize on it. I been accused of a lot of things in my time. But it's a hard world and a man's got to be hard to get along.

“I made my money from lumber and real estate mostly. I got started young and I worked hard. First I used my hands and muscle; then I started usin' my brain and lettin' other men work with their hands. A lot more strong backs in this country than there are sharp minds. Didn't take me long to figger it out neither. I was a young feller, in my twenties, and doin' pretty well. I owned a sawmill and a store and a lot of land. I had some good timberlands, some of the best around. I always knew my lumber. I took to lumber like a redheaded woodpecker.

“Feller tried to get me to buy into the granite business one time. Told him I didn't want no part of It. I was doin' all right with lumber and land. He said I was a fool not to step in where there was real money. He says, 'There's always people dyin' and they always need gravestones.' I told him there was always people bein' born too, and they always needed wood for houses and land to build 'em on. “Another thing,” I says, “the boys that work for me are workin' outdoors where it's clean and healthy. A little sawdust don't hurt 'em none. But the men in your sheds are breathin' in dust that'll put 5 'em under one of them stones before their time. If they've got enough money to afford one.”

“Well, this big New York company wanted to buy some of my timberland. They sent men up here to look it all over, and they liked the looks of it first-rate. I made sure they saw the

best stuff standin'. Well, after fussin' and foolin' around they went back to New York to report. Had some correspondence with the company. I was supposed to go to New York to close the deal. I knew them fellers thought I was pretty green, so I thought I'd have some fun with 'em.

“I bought a whole new outfit for the trip down to New York. I bought me some overalls, a jumper, boots, sheepskin leggin's, and I dressed up in 'em and wore 'em down. Them city fellers liked to die when they see me come in the office.

“I says to 'em: 'Had a tarnation of a time findin' this place. So many big high buildin's and so many people. You're way up in the air here, ain't you? How fur you s'pose it is down to the ground? I ain't used to all this commotion. Almost wish I had stayed to home.'

“I says to 'em: 'This is my best outfit I got on here. Only wear it to dress up for somethin' special. Couple of years I'll buy me a new one, and I'll put this one right on for everyday. Up home we have to be sparin' of our clothes.'

“I says: 'What be them cars that run up on top of them tall poles and make such an awful racket. I wouldn't dare to walk under 'em let alone ride in 'em. I never see such contraptions as you got here in the city.'

“Well, by God, them city fellers was having more fun with 6 me, you know — but not half so much fun as I was havin' with them. Finally we got 'round to talkin' business. They wanted to give me three thousand dollars, down payment. I held out for five thousand. They begin to sweat and squirm a little then. After quite a spell they got ready to write me off a check for five thousand. I stalled 'em off some more, said I'd promised my wife not to close the deal till I talked with her. They wanted me to use the office phone but I said I had to have a private telephone booth when I talked to my wife, on account she had such a loud voice it might rupture folks' eardrums that wa'n't used to listenin' to it. So they let me go out. I stopped in a place I knew before and got a couple drinks. I gave the bartender some more of that farmer lingo, and the fellers in there liked to died laughin' at me. What

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I really went out for was to go to a bank and see if their check was any good. I found out it was and I went back to the office and picked it up. Them fellers didn't appear none too happy.

“Then I asks 'em how I'm goin' to get back to the depot. I told 'em I was pretty apt to get lost in all the crowds and traffic and noise. I said I couldn't keep from lookin' up at the high buildin's and it made me dizzy and I was apt to fall down and get run over. Well, by God, you know what they did? They sent a man right along with me clear up as far as White River Junction!” Hank Davis cackled gleefully and pounded his knee. His cold blue eyes sparkled under the tangle of thin white hair.

“Well, in the spring them city fellers came up to take 7 over, you know, and I collected the rest on the land. After they talked to some of the local lumbermen they began to think maybe they hadn't made such a good deal as they thought. They found out they hadn't stung Hank Davis a whole hell of a lot. And here's the best part of it all now. That company went bankrupt tryin' to get the lumber out of there!

“Oh, I've pulled some pretty good ones, I have. And 'twouldn't surprise me none if I pull a few more before I'm done. Naturally I got caught up with once in awhile, and I've spent a good deal of time in the courtroom. But I never minded that none. Matter of fact I used to get a big kick out of fightin' them trials. 'Specially when old lawyer Dunkirk — the old judge, you know — was in on 'em.

“The old judge and I was great friends. Used to take our dinners together down at the old hotel. That's when I kept an office here in town. We had dinner together about every noon. He was a great character, the judge, almighty sharp and smart, he was. I was gettin' sued once and Dunkirk was defendin' me. We beat 'em too. After the trial he says to me: 'Hank, you come near tellin' the truth there once, and by God, I was afraid. If you had of, we'd lost the case sure!'

“He was tryin' a case once, old Kirk was. Seems that this one feller had a whole corporation buffaloed. They had got hold of him somewhere plannin' to use him, you know. Instead of that Billings used them, and he near used 'em up before he was through. Well sir, Kirk was addressin' the jury and he says? 'When I was a boy my father told me never to pick up a porcupine. He told me to let porcupines alone, because once 8 you got hold of 'em you couldn't let go — no matter how much you wanted to. The more you tried to get rid of 'em the more quills they threw into you. 'That is,' he says, 'the same advice that should've been given this corporation.' — I won't give it no name here — 'They should've let Billings alone in the first place. Now all they got is a big handfull of quills and more stabbin' them all the time.' Well sir, that jury — they was all farmers anyway — they roared and laughed and roared some more. That meant more to them than all the fine points of law there is. Judge Kirk understood human nature and he knew men.

“He had a rape case once, the old Judge did. He asked the woman if she screamed when the man attacked her. She says: 'I always do.' Kirk threw the case out. The woman was nothin' but an old rip anyway. Usually is that kind that brings up charges of rape, I figger... Kirk and I was good friends always. I didn't go to his funeral, don't believe in 'em much. Didn't go to see him when he was sick even. Knew he was dyin', and he did too. Knew if I went up I'd get to bawlin' and so would Kirk. Felt just as bad about it as any man alive, I did. Never did have to go to funerals to show my feelin's. There's enough professional funeral-goers amongst the females in this country.

“Speakin' of funerals it's too bad that bomb didn't get Hitler that time. Prob'ly it's too late to do any good to kill him anyway. He's got his machine all built up. But maybe if he had been blowed up, them German's'd start fightin' amongst 9 themselves. All they've done so far in this war is lie about how many of each other's ships and submarines have been sunk, or how many planes they've shot down on each other. This country could stay out of that mess and get rich, if they knew enough to.

“I remember when the Lusitania was sunk in fourteen or fifteen — nineteen-fifteen, I think it was. Them people had been warned not to cross on that boat. They went ahead just the same. I was arguin' with a feller about that. He said they had a right to go. I said maybe they did have a right to, but just the same they'd been given warnin', by God, and they should've taken it. I says: 'If a feller was settin' off a big blast of dynamite a piece down the road and you should come along in your car. He'd warn you to stop and wait for the blast. You'd still have a right to go ahead and get blowed to hell — if you was damn fool enough. And knowing how bull-headed you are that's prob'ly just what you'd do! But whose fault would it really be? Yours or his?"

“I had another argument with the same feller. He was standin' up for dictatorships. I was standin' up for a democracy. He tells how all the big improvements in the world have been under dictators. He points out Napoleon, Frederick the Great, Caesar, Alexander, all them old-timers. Then he tries to show how much Mussolini has done for Italy, Hitler for Germany, Stalin for Russia, and all them modern dictators. I let him rave on for a spell. Then I says to him: 'Look here now. A democracy is a new form of government compared to the 10 others. It's still in the experimental stage. We're the baby amongst nations; our government to the baby amongst other forms of government. Look right here.' I says. 'I'll show you the difference between a dictatorship and a democracy.

“'Your dictatorship is like a big proud ship,' I says. 'Steamin' away across the ocean with a great steel hulk and great powerful engines drivin' it. It's goin' fast and it's goin' strong and it looks like nothin' could stop it. What happens? Your fine ship strikes something — under the surface. Maybe it's a vine or a reef, maybe it's a torpedo or an ice-berg. And your wonderful ship sinks.

“Now you take our democracy,' I says to him. “It's like we're ridin' on a raft, a rickety raft that was put together in a hurry. We get tossed about on the waves, it's bad going, and our feet are always wet. But that raft don't sink 'cause you can't sink it! You can sink your great ship, but you can't sink our poor little raft. It's the raft that will get to shore at last — long

after we're dead and buried; Long after your big ships, and their captains too, are sunk and forgot.

“That's the way I look at it, boys, that's just exactly how I see it. You can do as you like, think as you like. I figger for me I'll stay right on the raft, boys... Until my wave or my shark comes along, or somebody throws me off.”